

## MARY PALMER SMITH

### I. BIOGRAPHY

Mary Smith, the founder and Executive Director of Babyland Nursery, Inc. earned a B.S. degree from Rutgers University-Livingston College with a major in Sociology and an M.A. from Kean College in Early Childhood Education. She was awarded honorary doctorates by Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey and Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

Mrs. Smith served as a trustee of the New Jersey University of Medicine and Dentistry. She is a member of the State Human Services Advisory Council, a member of the State Child Care Advisory Board, New Jersey State Department of Human Services Ad Hoc Committee on Infant /Toddler Child Care Regulation; National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs; and The National Committee of the Campaign for Human Development. Her awards include: Kean College-Outstanding Graduate; New Jersey Pride Award, 1989; Senator Bill Bradley's "Unsung Heroine Award" and the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Award from Pope John Paul II, the highest award that the Catholic Church gives to a lay person. This marked the first time a black woman had ever been the recipient of this award. She was also one of the "Faces of Hope" guest at President Bill Clinton's Inaugural Gala. In 1996, Mary was presented the Phenomenal Woman Award by the Honorable Gayle Chaneyfield, Councilwoman-at-Large and she also received the Ann Klein Award for dedicated and forceful service as a community activist who advocates for the delivery of quality service to the elderly population of Newark's Central Ward.

A resident of Newark since she was six years old, Mary Smith is thoroughly familiar with inner-city problems, especially those of Newark, a city whose people she loves with all of her heart. She has seen her city change from a multi-cultural city where small flourishing businesses lined the streets. She remembers when the downtown area was once a major regional retail center with large department stores, branches of national chain merchandisers, three large movie theaters and cultural sites and events that rivalled those of most cities.

"This was a place where you could leave your door unlocked. In our neighborhood there were blacks and whites. Then you began to see a progression in the early 1960's with whites who used to live over their businesses starting to move to the suburbs. Buildings started looking terrible. People stopped cleaning up, and the suburbanites coming back in to look around would say 'I lived there and look at how bad it is now.' They were blaming black people who didn't own the housing. People from the suburbs owned it, but

they wouldn't paint it or repair anything."

Mrs. Smith had four young children and was juggling a number of jobs with her husband. However, when the needs of a sick child demanded more of her attention, she stopped working. In 1964 the family moved to Scudder Homes, the State's largest public housing project which was made up of a series of 13-story buildings, housing 1,200 families. The lessons she learned about public housing, life and the people in Newark's infamous public housing projects molded her thinking and helped to shape the New Community philosophy.

"I was the third person to move into my building. The day after I moved in, I went shopping and returned to find the elevator was broken. I lived on the eleventh floor, and that elevator stayed broken. Then we didn't have hot water. I found out they didn't put screens on windows above the seventh floor. I went to complain about the mosquitos we were getting at night and was told that the Federal government had determined that mosquitos didn't go above the seventh floor. The mosquitos were eating my kids up. It changed my attitude about people in public housing."

Mrs. Smith organized the residents to fight back by prodding the public housing bureaucracy to provide hot water, repair elevators and put screens on windows. She worked tirelessly with tenants, teaching them skills like budgeting, sewing and doing laundry. Within six months, Mrs. Smith became president of the new tenant's association at Scudder Homes and became involved in a statewide public housing tenant's group, schooling herself in neighborhood activism and even agitating for improvements in Newark's overcrowded public school system.

Residents also expressed concerns about street crime and other dangerous conditions in their neighborhoods, which they attributed partly to a lack of police presence. Mary Smith's response was to organize the Tenant's Association of Scudder Homes and tenants from other public housing to pack the City Council meeting with 1,500 residents. The politicians got the message and soon provided additional police protection for the area. The group also called for a Police Review Board to investigate suspected corruption on the force. The Newark Police Department refused, but did permit neighborhood representatives to ride on police patrols to see them doing their jobs and to convince residents that police were not brutal.

Mary Smith next became involved in Operation Understanding, an early civil rights awareness movement in Newark. This involvement followed a series of conversations and meetings with Father William J. Linder, the founder of New Community Corporation, who wanted Mrs. Smith involved in the efforts that were to seed one

of the most effective community development relationships in Newark. From this sprang a remarkably effective and dedicated group called Operation Housewives that was soon to have 15 chapters around New Jersey. Mrs. Smith became co-chairperson of this coalition of urban and suburban women.

She spent six years traveling to churches in the suburbs talking about the plight of inner city residents. One of the messages that she took was the need to create well-paying jobs for urban women. The suburban women could encourage their husbands to help by opening up jobs and developing training programs. Many of the suburban men held prominent posts in prestigious firms.

However, according to Mrs. Smith, jobs were of minimal value, without reliable child care for the prospective working mothers, during working hours. No day-care center in Newark would accept children under 2 1/2 years of age. Nor was there any infant day care center in New Jersey.

Mary Smith was determined to provide day care, and for over twenty five years has been doing just that. With funds from the Operation Housewives' thrift shop, the first Babyland Nursery opened in August 1969 in a seven-room apartment in Scudder Homes. Now there are seven centers, caring for nearly 700 children in the Central Ward, the Roseville area and Downtown Newark.

Although she is now a grandmother of five, Mary Smith shows no signs of slowing down. She has a hands-on approach to her Babyland responsibilities and serves as treasurer of the Board of Directors of New Community Corporation, as well.

## II. BABYLAND NURSERY

Babyland Nursery, Inc. was incorporated in the state of New Jersey in 1970 and Mary Smith became the Executive Director. Babyland was a national trailblazer when it began providing day care to the children of the Central Ward. It was New Jersey's first non-profit interracial day care center for children from 2 1/2 months to five years old. Not a single day care center in Newark would accept children under 2 1/2 years of age, and infant day care was unheard of in New Jersey.

Mary Smith understood that the hundreds of mothers in her neighborhood required good, dependable day care, if they were going to hold down jobs. She continued to inform her suburban counterparts about the jobs that Central Ward residents needed and the obstacles they faced in finding day care for their children. The group set up the Central/West Ward Service League of Newark, which opened a thrift shop called Operation Housewives, at 302 South Orange Avenue. Run by Newark women and stocked by suburbanites, this entrepreneurial venture succeeded in raising the money needed for the day care center. With the

intervention of the suburban women, the fledgling group received a vacant seven-room apartment in the Scudder Homes Housing Project.

#### EARLY STRUGGLES

"We did the work ourselves," Mary Smith says, "And, in a year the center was open. It was beautiful, bright and cheerful with new furniture. Operation Housewives helped us staff it. I insisted that it had to be equal to what you'd find in suburbia: no second-hand furniture or equipment, nothing inferior."

Babyland was an immediate success. The center's hours were 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and the original enrollment of 26 children soon grew to 40. Within a year Babyland's waiting list had ballooned to 200 families. Three years later more than 1,000 mothers were waiting to have their children admitted--evidence of the need for child care in the Central Ward.

This partnership, unique at the time, forged a strong bond between the more privileged element of society who saw a need and responded to it and the less privileged inner city dwellers. In a sense the "founding mothers," both black and white, set a precedent for Babyland's being supported mutually by the inner city parents and other more affluent members of society. No Federal or State funding was used until 1973.

Finances were initially very scarce. Government officials were not inclined to respond favorably to Babyland's request for State and Federal aid to offset the cost of caring for the children. The New Jersey Bureau of Children Services, the State agency dealing with children's issues, said Babyland could not receive government aid because it lacked the proper license for child care, furthermore it was impossible to license Babyland, they alleged, because there were no Federal guidelines for certifying infant day care centers. No license meant no aid, but no one could issue a license because there were no rules.

After a year-and-a-half of phone calls, meeting with lawyers and various investigations, Babyland's Executive Director discovered that the Federal government required a state to have regulations and standards for infant day care in order to qualify for aid. New Jersey had none. Nor would it supply the 25% State Match of funds that the Federal program required.

"To write standards, we had to go to the politicians and that's where the suburbanites came in again," Mary Smith said.

Babyland's suburban allies enlisted Assembly Speaker Thomas Kean (later to be Governor of New Jersey) and other legislators in their cause. Mr. Kean called public hearings to examine the lack of day care in the State. The hearings put pressure on the State to write standards that would free Federal money for Babyland.

The pressure on state officials to act was also increased by U.S. Senator Harrison Williams, who suggested circumventing Federal regulations by having Babyland certified as a pilot project which would make it eligible for Federal aid; a move that would have placed the day care center beyond the reach of New Jersey bureaucrats.

Babyland's Executive Director meanwhile asked to sit on the State Task Force that was being formed to draft infant day care standards. In 1970 and 1971 Mary Smith, the women from Operation Housewives, and the Board of Directors of Babyland drafted four proposals for infant day care standards. The state responded to their ideas by declaring that it was not writing guidelines, but just studying whether they were needed or not. Eight months later, on September 23, 1971, guidelines for infant day care were published. The title was Standards for Group Day Care of Infants. They had been developed by Mary Smith and her associates.

State regulators ignored virtually all of Babyland's recommendations and drew up a list of regulations that would have created more problems than they solved. Assembly speaker Kean again came to Babyland's aid, scheduling hearings that allowed its directors to mount a challenge to the State's guidelines. Because of the Trenton hearings and the continuing political pressure on State regulators to compromise, many of the regulatory changes supported by Babyland were finally enacted.

#### BABYLAND BEGINS TO EXPAND

When public monies became more readily available in 1973, Babyland had already bought and renovated a former medical office building for its second day care center. A child abuse program, with 35 day care slots, opened in 1975. That same year the original Babyland in Scudder Homes Housing Projects had to close after a rash of break-ins, leaking pipes, a basement fire and the lack of heat and hot water. Their experience at Scudder Homes made Babyland's Executive Director and supporters determined to build and control their own facilities in the future.

In 1978 Essex County wanted to setup a shelter for the victims of Domestic violence. A number of traditional service agencies were anxious to win the contract to run the facility, but thought the \$50,000 budgeted was insufficient. Meetings went on for a year, thus, this long-term haggling placed the funding in danger of expiring. Then a surprising development occurred at one of the

meetings that Babyland was hosting. Babyland was offered the contract to run the shelter because the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) was impressed with its commitment, experience, capabilities, and track record for success. Through a concerted effort, DYFS facilitated the process to have Babyland run the facility. Today the Babyland-sponsored Essex County Family Violence Program provides housing and counseling for more than 40 women and their children each month.

Babyland III, a \$2 million facility for nearly 200 infants and toddlers, opened on South Orange Avenue in 1981. The nursery was planned by more than 50 neighborhood residents, Babyland employees, and a number of early childhood experts, who helped to custom-design it. A \$900,000 mortgage was financed through the New Jersey Economic Development Authority with first Fidelity Bank of New Jersey. The first center to be built in New Jersey for infants and toddlers, from the ground up, it is truly a child-centered state of the art day-care facility.

#### SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Several years later, the Federal Head Start Agency wanted to launch two pilot programs for HIV children, a Newark Head Start provider was asked to set one up. They refused to get involved because of the stigma attached to AIDS. However, Babyland accepted the challenge and in 1989 opened one of the nation's first day care centers for children infected with HIV. The Babyland IV center provides medical treatment and day care for 30 children, as well as counseling, education and support services for their parents. With New Jersey ranking fourth nationally in pediatric AIDS cases and with more than 200 children being treated at Newark's United Hospitals Medical Center for the illness, Babyland IV fills another critical void in the Central Ward. It allows the toddlers to socialize in a pleasant environment with age-appropriate activities, rather than have them restricted to the lonely, clinical surroundings of a hospital.

Babyland Nursery, Inc. is also taking on the challenge of teenage pregnancy in the City of Newark, through a program that serves teen mothers and their children. The Babyland Parent-Child Center operates a two part program which is Federally funded by Head Start. One section offers services to 31 pregnant teenagers, ages 15-18, who attend workshops that teach nutrition, pre-natal care, and parenting skills. Girls who are not under a physician's care are referred to a clinic. A host of services is available, such as Women, Infants, Children (WIC), food stamps, and other services that ensure the well-being of the infant and mother. The Head Start Parent Center offers an additional 15 young women a chance to create a better life for their babies and

7

themselves. Mothers who are 16-18 years old may place their children from ages three months to three years in the Babyland I Day Care Program while they attend school or work. They must attend workshops each weekday from 3:30 to 4:30 where they learn good parenting skills, life skills, and the availability of social services. They are encouraged to go into their children's classes, both to participate in their children's care and to observe skilled caregivers who serve as parenting role models. Most stay in the program for the entire three years.

In 1990 when New Community opened Harmony House, 102 units of traditional housing for homeless families, Babyland V became an integral part of the facility. It now serves 76 homeless infants and toddlers each day while their parents are learning how to become self-sufficient through job training and basic education.

Babyland VI opened in 1992 in the downtown headquarters of New Jersey Blue Cross and Blue Shield. It has the capacity to serve up to 95 children of Blue Cross/Blue Shield employees. In 1994, Babyland VII began operating in a bright, freshly remodeled, growth and development conducive facility which was once a building that belonged to the Telephone Company. Serving mostly children at risk, the center serves nearly 60 toddlers.

#### CHILDREN TOGETHER: FOSTER CARE

Babyland pioneered a new form of child care in 1993 when it opened Children Together. Brothers and sisters from severely dysfunctional families are often separated, not only from their parents, but also from each other when they are by necessity placed in foster care. This severance has devastating effects on children. However, if they can remain together as part of their natural family, they retain some semblance of stability and permanence. Children Together provides a community-based option that offers continuity of care and planning for sibling groups and other children from birth to ten years of age by using a three-fold approach:

- Children Together Home(South Orange, N.J.) is a residence with a capacity for twelve children, with enough room to house siblings who are maintained together in a family-style living environment.

- Specialized Foster Homes Program which offers training and evaluation of prospective foster parents, coordinated case management, and has a community resource component. In March 1995, Babyland established the Boarder Babies Program as part of its Foster Care Program. Through this program, babies who are not permitted, by DYFS, to leave the hospital with their parents are placed in the loving care of foster parents.

-Provides support services and special training to DYFS foster parents, which include crisis intervention, health care, nutrition, special cultural requirements and family reunification.

Children Together emphasizes the merits of a home-like, supportive environment by means of appropriate role-modeling, positive relationship building activities, family-group oriented functions, and warm, comfortable physical surroundings.

#### SUMMARY

Babyland Nursery's eight locations include six day-care centers, a Family Violence Shelter, and the Children Together Home. A total of 20 different programs address the needs of children and their families. The centers provide quality day care for over 1000 children, ranging from prenatal to 5 years of age. They benefit from both an early childhood education and a health maintenance and nutrition program, parent involvement in their children's development, as well as a transportation program.

The services provided to the children at every Babyland center are comprehensive. Nearly half of the youngsters cared for in the seven nurseries receive a wide array of social services. Field workers visit their homes, assisting parents to care properly for their children. All of the toddlers are enrolled in the Federal WIC Program to ensure that their nutritional needs are met. Children are immunized and given complete physical examinations. The centers keep complete medical records on each child.

The staff of 197 during summer months, includes 165 full-time employees. Nearly half hold professional degrees or certifications. Their backgrounds range from Child Development Associate to Ph.D. and cover many fields including: Social Work, Sociology, Nursing, Early Childhood Education, Nutrition, Family & Child Development and Psychology. This highly experienced staff is augmented by volunteers who serve at most centers, and 15 members of the State's Foster Grandparents Program who serve at Centers I, III, and VII.

Babyland has a proud tradition of staff training. It develops and maintains high standards of care. Its teachers and caregivers are continually updated on the latest methods and trends in infant and early childhood education. Caregivers can earn up to 36 credits in Early Childhood Education through on-site, in-service training courses which are taught by accredited staff members.



Babyland is a model of excellence through its provision of community services. It serves both the general population as well as children with special needs. Babyland and its related programs are unmatched in the areas of early childhood care and education, parenting, and family life. Renowned nationally, it has been visited by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, Governor Christine Todd Whitman, as well as hundreds of interested service providers, foundation officials, and other national and international visitors seeking to discover the secret of the "Babyland Success." A great part of this success must be attributed to the tireless efforts of Mary Smith, whose loyalty and commitment to the cause for nearly 30 years has resulted in a model of urban day care.